

# THE THREE PARTNERS

Or.

The Big Strike on Heavy Tree Hill.

By BRET HARTE.

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## CHAPTER IV.

The dictation and copy finished together, Demorest laid the freshly written sheet beside the letter Stacy had produced. They were very much alike, and yet quite distinct from each other. Only the signatures were identical.

"That's the invariable mistake with the forger," said Demorest; "he always forges that signatures ought to be identical with the text rather than with each other."

But Stacy did not seem to hear this or require further proof. His face was quite gray and his lips compressed until lost in his closely set beard as he gazed fixedly out of the window. For the first time really concerned and touched, Demorest laid his hand gently on his shoulder.

"Tell me, Jim, how much does this mean to you—apart from me? Don't think of me."

"I don't know yet," said Stacy slowly. "That's the trouble. And I won't know until I know who's at the bottom of it. Does anybody know of your affairs with me?"

"No one."

"No confidential friend, eh?"

"None."

"No one who has access to your secrets? No—no woman? Excuse me, Phil," he said, as a peculiar look passed over Demorest's face, "but this is business."

"No," he returned, with that gentleness that used to frightened them in the old days. "It's ignorance. You fellows always say '*Chereker la femme*' when you can't say anything else. Come now," he went on more brightly, "look at the letter. Here's a man commercially educated, for he used the usual business formulas, 'on receipt of this' and 'advice received,' which I won't merely say I don't use, but which few but commercial men use. Next, here's a man who uses slang not only inaptly, but artificially, to give the letter the easy, familiar turn it hasn't from beginning to end. I need only say, my dear Stacy, that I don't write slang to you, but that nobody who understands slang ever writes it in that way. And then the knowledge of my opinion of Barker is such as might be gained from the reading of my letters by a person who couldn't comprehend my feelings. Now, let me play inquisitor for a few moments. Has anybody access to my letters to you?"

"No one. I keep them locked up in a cabinet. I receive memorandums of your instructions, which I give to my clerks, but never your letters."

"But your clerks sometimes see you make memorandums from them!"

"Yes; but none of them have the ability to do this sort of thing nor the opportunity of profiting by it."

"Has any woman—now this is not retaliation, my dear Jim, for I fancy I detect a woman's cleverness and a woman's stupidity in this forgery—any access to your secrets or my letters? A woman's villainy is always effective for the moment, but always defective when probed."

The look of scorn which passed over Stacy's face was quite as distinct as Demorest's previous protest as he said contemptuously. "I'm not such a fool as to mix up petticoats with my business, whatever I do."

"Well, one thing more. I have told you that in my opinion the forger is a commercial education, a man who doesn't know me nor Barker, and doesn't understand slang. Now, I have to add what must have occurred to you, Jim, that the forger is either a coward or his object is not altogether mercenary, for the ability displayed in this letter would on the signature alone—had it been on a check or draft—drawn from your bank twenty times the amount concerned. Now, what is the actual loss by this forgery?"

"Very little; for you've got a good price for your stocks, considering the depreciation in realizing suddenly on so large an amount. I told my broker to sell slowly and in small quantities to avoid a panic. But the real loss is the control of the stock."

"But the amount I had was not enough to affect that," said Demorest.

"No, but I was carrying myself a large amount, and together we controlled the market, and now I have unloaded, too."

"You sold out! and with your doubts?" said Demorest.

"That's just it," said Stacy, looking steadily at his companion's face. "Because I had doubts, and it won't do for me to have them. I ought either to have disengaged my shares and kept your stock and my own or have done just what I did. I might have hedged on my own stock, but I don't believe in hedging. There is no mid-life course to a man in my business if he wants to keep at the top. No great success, no great power was ever created by it."

Demorest added: "Yet you accept the alternative also, which is ruin?"

"Precisely," said Stacy. "When you returned the other day you were bound to find me what I was or a beggar. But nothing between, However," he added, "this has nothing to do with the forger, or," he smiled grimly, "everything to do with it. Hush! Barker is coming."

There was a quick step along the corridor approaching the room. The next moment the door flew open to the bounding step and laughing face of Barker. Whatever of thoughtfulness or despondency he had carried from the room in which he was completely gone, with his amazing buoyancy and power of reaction he was there again in his usual frank, cheerful simplicity.

"I thought I'd come in and say 'good night,'" he began with a laugh. "I got 'Sta' asleep after some high links we had together, and then I reckoned it wasn't the square thing to leave just you two together the first night, you came. And I remembered I had some business to talk over, too, so I thought I'd chip in again and take a hand. It's only the shark of the evening yet," he continued gayly, "and we ought to sit up at least long enough to see the old snow line vanish, as we did in old times. But I say," he added suddenly, as he glanced from the one to the other, "you've been having it pretty strong already. Why, you both look as you did that night the backwater of the South Fork came into existence."

"What's up?"

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"I reckon you're right there," said Barker, with a chuckle. "People always laugh, of course, when I talk business, so it might make it a little livelier for you and more of a change if I chipped in now. Only I don't know which you'll do. Hand me a pipe. Well," he continued, filling the pipe Demorest shoved toward him, "you see, I was in Sacramento yesterday and I went into Van Loo's branch office, as I heard he was there and I wanted to find out something about Kitty's investments, which I don't think he's managing exactly right. He was there, however, but as I was waiting I heard a boy walk along a group of wheat trust, and that there was a lot of it put upon the market. They seemed to think that something had happened to it and it had gone down further. Now, I knew it was Jim's scheme, and that Phil had a lot of shares in it, too, so just as I went to the other to the other, 'you've been having it pretty strong already. Why, you both look as you did that night the backwater of the South Fork came into existence.'

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